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General debate on national experience in population matters: assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development

Statement submitted by Médecins du monde international, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Acting now for better access to contraception and safe and legal abortion

While there have been significant advances in the area of maternal health over the last 20 years, with a 47.87 per cent drop in the maternal mortality rate between 1990 and 2010, the goal of reducing the number of maternal deaths by 75 per cent outlined in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo Conference) will not be met. At the current rate, only 23 of the 181 countries concerned will honour their commitment by 2015 and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 5 remains the most off-track.

The refusal of many Governments to address adequately the issue of unintended pregnancies is one of the possible reasons for the lack of progress. Unintended pregnancies are one of the main factors contributing to maternal morbidity and mortality. Every year, there are 80 million unwanted pregnancies in developing countries, which accounts for nearly 40 per cent of pregnancies worldwide. This effectively results in an increased number of high-risk pregnancies, especially relating to early and closely spaced pregnancies, and a high number of unsafe abortions. Close to 50,000 women die every year due to the complications of an unsafe abortion, representing 13 per cent of maternal deaths worldwide. Some 8 million women require medical attention for complications resulting from unsafe abortion; however, more than one third of them have never had access to adequate care.

Improving the prevention and treatment of unintended pregnancies clearly represents a major public health issue and is an indispensable approach for meeting goals in combating maternal mortality. Twenty years after the Cairo Conference, the United Nations agenda must provide the opportunity for Member States to recognize this fact and to make the necessary commitments in order to guarantee better access to contraception and safe and legal abortion.

Addressing unmet needs for family planning

The universal access to contraception promised in Cairo and at the United Nations Millennium Summit is far from a reality. Today, an estimated 222 million women who wish to avoid or delay pregnancy in developing countries still lack access to modern methods of contraception. While there have been international initiatives in recent years to promote family planning, the proportion of unmet needs in modern contraceptive methods has remained virtually unchanged across all developing countries over the last decade. Additional efforts are necessary and must be aimed more specifically at the most vulnerable adolescents who lack access to sexual education and contraception. Every year, more than 7 million young girls become mothers before the age of 18 and 2 million before the age of 15. Complications related to pregnancy or childbirth are one of the main causes of death among teenage girls in low-income countries.

Satisfying all unmet family-planning needs would have significant ramifications, reducing the number of unintended pregnancies by 54 million and the number of unsafe abortions by 16 million. To achieve this, the international community would have to agree to allocate more resources to family planning with a view to ensuring universal access, without coercion or discrimination, to quality

services that suit the needs of each individual, and in particular to comprehensive sexual education and a full range of modern contraceptive methods, including emergency contraception.

Defending the right to medical abortion

While investing in the prevention of unintended pregnancies is fundamental, universal access to modern contraception cannot be the only solution to the problem of unsafe abortions. One third of unintended pregnancies result from the improper use or failure of contraceptive methods, or simply from the non-availability of the chosen method. It is therefore essential that, in addition to contraception, women and girls have access to legal and safe abortion as necessary.

Today, more than half of the 40 million abortions performed every year are conducted in unsanitary conditions. Although more than 20 countries have liberalized their abortion laws over the past two decades, close to 40 per cent of women of childbearing age still live in countries with very restrictive legislation on abortion. It is important to note here that legally prohibiting abortion is not a deterrent. On the contrary, it poses a significant risk to the health of women who have no choice but to resort to illegal methods in order to terminate a pregnancy. From this perspective, liberalizing access to safe and legal abortion is an essential component of maternal mortality reduction policies.

During the special session of the General Assembly on the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014, States should move beyond ideological opposition and regard the right to abortion as a practical and key part of the solution to a major public health issue. This would involve, as a first step, honouring the commitments made in the Programme of Action by striving to ensure that, in circumstances where abortion is not against the law, there is effective access to safe abortion (para. 8.25). This would also require countries that have not yet done so to consider decriminalizing and legalizing abortion. In Uruguay, the State opted to decriminalize abortion in 2012 in response to a vigorous campaign by health-care professionals and civil society organizations, in which Médecins du monde participated. This decision is a milestone for women's health in Uruguay and opens the way for universal and quality access to abortion services. In this crucial year for sexual and reproductive rights, other States should follow the example set by Uruguay.

Twenty years after the Cairo Conference, and one year before the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals, the special session of the General Assembly will be a turning point in defining the post-2015 development agenda. In a context of widespread questioning of women's sexual and reproductive rights, Médecins du monde calls on the international community to remain vigilant and demonstrate vision in reaffirming the importance of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children. To ensure the full exercise of this right, better ways must be found to address key areas of the Programme of Action, in particular challenges in the prevention and treatment of unintended pregnancies.

Consequently, Médecins du monde makes the following recommendations to States:

- Ensure that sexual and reproductive health is made a priority objective in the post-2015 development agenda
- Significantly increase the resources allocated to fund sexual and reproductive health care and services
- Increase the proportion of official development assistance dedicated to sexual and reproductive health care and services
- Establish a monitoring and oversight mechanism to review annually the progress achieved in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Guarantee young people, whether in or out of school, universal access to comprehensive sexual education to help them take informed decisions on the subject, in line with gender equality and shared responsibilities
- Guarantee women and girls access to a wide range of modern contraceptive methods, including emergency contraception
- Remove legal and statutory barriers to accessing contraception and sexual and reproductive health information, such as mandatory parental consent and age and marital status-related restrictions
- Ensure free access to modern contraceptive methods, including long-term methods (such as the inter-uterine device (IUD), implants and voluntary sterilization)
- Guarantee access to a comprehensive range of quality services dispensed in a humane and caring manner, enabling all women and adolescent girls to benefit from medical treatment for a termination or for complications linked to an unsafe abortion
- Repeal laws and regulations which limit the full realization of the right to abortion, such as parental or spousal permission or statutory waiting periods
- Abolish laws containing punitive measures against women and adolescent girls who have undergone illegal abortions and release those held in detention, in accordance with paragraph 106 (k) of the Beijing Platform for Action
- Revise laws and policies to make abortion accessible and legal
- Ensure free access to safe and legal abortion services

For further information, refer to the file "Unsafe abortion: from denial to action" available in French and English from www.medecinsdumonde.org/Nos-Combats/Priorites-d-action/Promotion-de-la-sante-sexuelle-et-reproductive-SSR under the tab entitled "Plaidoyer".